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AUTHOR Fidalgo, Reyes I.; von Schmidt, Wolff
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ABSTRACT

Use of games in the second language classroom to assess class participation and development of oral skills is discussed. Difficulties in assessing oral second language skills are outlined, and a central issue is identified: the discrepancy between a syllabus in which class participation is required and students unwilling to participate due to lack of motivation or anxiety about speaking in class. It is argued that peer assessment, used carefully, can be an effective method of evaluating student progress. Classroom games are proposed as a technique for motivating participation, promoting creativity, and testing language skills in a meaningful context. Such tests can be integrative in that they require learners to make connections between discrete points of language within a specific communicative context. An activity using the board game "Outburst" to test both vocabulary and grammatical structures while providing feedback to learners is described. Contains 16 references. (MSE)

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ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT: THE USE OF GAMES IN THE CLASSROOM

Prof. Reyes I. Fidalgo
Dept. of Hispanic Studies
University of Massachusetts-Boston

Prof. Wolff von Schmidt
Dept. of Languages and Literatures
University of Utah

"The purpose of the test is to measure variance in performance of various sorts", (Oller, pg. 401); the purpose of assessment is to involve students in making decisions about the degree to which their performance matches their ability. Although tests have become an accepted component of instruction throughout the world, conventional testing in modern foreign language instruction presents several problems.

Despite of the progress in current, mentalist theories on teaching towards natural/communicative approaches, many of the theoretical assumptions underlying contemporary testing are based on behaviouristic views of cognition and development. The result, much too often, is that instructors are faced, on the one hand, with a syllabus in which class participation is part of the final grade, and on the other, with a student body who is not willing to participate out of lack of motivation (many of them take classes just to fulfill foreign language requirements), shyness, or fear to public exposure.

This presentation deals with the use of games in the classroom for the assessment of class participation, and explores creativity as an alternative way to conventional methods of monitoring students' language progress and performance. The challenging nature of team-games increases motivation, takes away the fear of public exposure, and makes learning fun. It helps students to feel safe to explore and use the language, while allowing instructors to keep scores that later can, if needed, be turned into grades.

The language teaching profession has experienced a substantial growth and expansion of knowledge over the last decades. Previous to this expansion, we had a

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tradition of many decades of teaching methodologies based on the empirical, behaviouristic school of thought.

Based on research done with animals, mainly primates, scientist of this period proposed a vinculation between animal behavior and human behavior. As Chastain points out (Chastain, 1976), the belief that human learning and animal learning might be parallel was reinforced by Darwin's Origin of the Species in 1859, according to whom, if there is a continuity between man and animal, by implication, there is a closeness between the works of the human mind and the animal mind. This approach brings about an increased interest in animal behavior which is immediately linked to human behavior.

The experimentation with animals in laboratories catches on, especially in the 1920's, and concludes with the rise of the Stimulus-Response school of psychology, in which all behavior is a response to a stimulus. Since behavior happens in causal associative chains, learning is, then, a habit formation process.

Their definition of learning, extends to language learning. The mind is thought to be a "tabula rasa" onto which are stamped associations between stimuli in the environment and responses coming from outside the organism for reinforcement (Chastain, 1976), and consequently, it is the learner's experience that is largely responsible for language learning and not any specific innate capacity. (Larse-Freeman, 1991)

The empiricist viewpoint is one that is skeptical of any explanation of language learning that cannot be observed. (McLaughlin, 1987) Within the patterns derived from their observations, the empiricists conclude that operant conditioning is responsible for verbal learning. Human beings are exposed to language, some patterns of language are reinforced and others are not. Only those patterns reinforced by the community of language users will persist. (Skinner, 1957)

It is not until the 1960's that these theories are challenged. Chomsky's critique of Skinners' Verbal Behavior brought attention to the unresolved issue of creativity in generating language, and showed that a behaviouristic perspective did not provide a satisfactory explanation of what had been found. The aforementioned critique created a shift toward the other end of the spectrum, and by the mid-sixties, teaching methodologies are based on the mentalist/rationalist approach that Chomsky had introduced.

Since those years, as Omaggio points out,

> . . . there has been an abundance of creative new approaches, materials, teaching ideas, and technological innovations in recent years, and no lack of stimulating, scholarly debate about how best to use them. Never before in our professional history have we had so many choices; never before has the need for professionalism and critical judgement been clearer. (Omaggio, pg. 1)

As teaching professionals, we all know how accurate the previous statement is. We only have to read any textbook on methodology to be confronted with teaching approaches which cover almost all possible definitions of language competence and language performance. In this realm, the variations range from Chomsky's idea of "linguistic competence" as the (merely linguistic) knowledge of the system of the language, to more practical, comprehensive models such as the Canale and Swain Model, which adds sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competences to the grammatical competence already posited.

While great advances have been made towards establishing national standards and measurements, very little has been done to fill the gap between how we improve students' language performance and how we measure this improvement.

If we look at the main textbooks in the market for teaching Spanish and German, we will find two rather different approaches: a natural approach based on Chomsky's concept of "language acquisition device" (LAD) and a communicative approach based on Piaget's theory of "cognitive development"; although different, they are both mentalist-based explanations of how the human mind learns and processes language. At this point, we need to remember that mentalist theories see language not as a structure, but as a rule governed creativity which emphasizes meaningfulness and unconscious understanding of psychologically real rules of grammar.

If we agree with the theory that language is not a structure that is learned through repetition and analogy, but to the contrary, is a rule governed creativity which implies the --conscious or unconscious-- understanding of the rules of grammar, and places an emphasis on meaning (ergo, communication) then, we must also agree that what we preach is not what we do, or, in other words, how we teach is not consistent with how we test our students' progress.

Within the foreign language curriculum, independently of the approach and teaching methodology, an important part of testing is done through grammar driven, repetitive exercises which are not a reflection of the changes that have been introduced into the classroom teaching. This is also an extension of another fact, the workbooks and, to some extent, the laboratory manuals that accompany textbooks present the students with exercises which for the most part tend to emphasize learning by repetition and/or analogy. Furthermore, following the format of the type of testing which is being analyzed in this paper, workbook and laboratory manual exercises are designed mostly for students to work alone, frequently not in a meaningful context, nor in a truly communicative setting.

We mentioned before, as an example of a comprehensive model of language competence, the Canale and Swain Model (Canale and Swain, 1980). According to this

hypothesis there are four components of language competence. The first component, the Grammatical Competence, is subdivided into: vocabulary, rules of pronunciation and spelling, word formation, and sentence structure. The second component, the Sociolinguistic Competence refers to: topic, setting, and speakers or register. The third, Discourse Competence, includes: cohesion in form, and coherence in thought; and the last component, the Strategic Competence contains verbal and non-verbal communication. While we should admit that a person who is competent in these four areas, is competent in the target language, we should also admit that some of the above mentioned components of language competence are not, or only peripherally, included in the testing process, especially on the lower language level.

It is all too obvious that competence cannot be measured as it is not observable, or, in other words: "Competence is what one knows. Performance is what one does. Only performance is observable, however, and it is only through performance that competence can be developed, maintained and evaluated". (Savignon, pg. 9). For this reason, we need to create systems of evaluation which measure the level of competence through observation of the students' performance.

We do not pretend to put the blame on textbooks and authors for the current lack of evaluations of the proposed nature, to the contrary, we would like to acknowledge the fact that teachers and textbook authors alike have made and undertaken great efforts to find solutions to this problem; nevertheless, the real circumstances of teaching a foreign language mainly to students which are in the classroom to fulfill language requirements, do not help to bridge this gap. As we said in our opening remarks, foreign language instructors are faced, much too often with two contradictory facts: a syllabus where class participation is required as part of the grade, and a student body unwilling to participate for several reasons: lack of motivation (language requirement), shyness, fear of public exposure, etc.

A basic lesson plan for the first and second year in a foreign language, starts with the statement of the goals for the day, and then, gradually moves on to the presentation of the material to the students in a contextualized and meaningful manner. For this purpose, instructors carefully prepare activities in order to bring to the classroom an abundance of realia, visual aids, etc., we pair students for practice in situations which are as close to real life as possible, and try to recreate possible circumstances in the country of the target language. With this approach we hope to overcome students' inertia, and maximize the opportunities for learning in a class setting. It would seem that we have eliminated the classic routine of explaining the structure of the day, and having the students going through repetitive lists of meaningless exercises without specific context.

Nevertheless, when the time comes to evaluate their progress, we produce a type of testing which keeps apart students from their classmates, and even from their teachers. We still resort to writing exams in utter secrecy, and we keep the exam hidden from the students until the big day comes.

> A final important aspect of testing is that the test is usually kept hidden from the students until it is administered, indicating a degree of secrecy in order to insure confidentiality. (Hancock, pg. 1)

This approach to testing fails to maintain two considerations which should be of absolute priority, the first one is that we cannot be sure that what is being tested is what the students know, the second, that all the care we have put into creating a contextualized, meaningful input is being thrown to the wind by following patterns and formats that do not match the learning process. Communicative approaches end where testing begins, it is not an exaggeration to say that at this point there is no further communication.

Our research has lead us to conclude that there are other possible ways of evaluation which follow more closely the mentalist teaching methodologies. What we

propose is a form of alternative assessment[1] which allows communication between students and teachers within the testing process, providing a progression of highly reliable[2] scores, while maintaining the continuity between teaching techniques and testing.

If we think of self-assessment[3] as it is frequently used, we might have to agree with Hancock's commentary on how leery some people feel about the term itself, but with a little analysis of some of its current applications, one can easily see that it suffers from the same affliction as the testing process does. Self-assessment does not provide in itself a continuation between teaching and testing. With a low level of competence, students can hardly measure performance, since they do not posses the adequate parameters to evaluate their own achievement. Unless carefully guided, it can, as a matter of fact, create more disorganization than benefits.

However, with a minimum of control and planning on the part of the teacher it can be turned into an invaluable tool for the development, maintenance and evaluation of language competence, since it allows students to achieve competence through the testing of their own performance. Furthermore, it gives us, the teacher, the possibility of truly evaluating what the students know, and fulfills the purpose of involving students in making decisions about the degree to which their performance matches their abilities.

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1 "Alternative assessment: an ongoing evaluation by a teacher; frequently refers to non-conventional ways (ergo, 'alternative') of evaluation of what learners know or can do with the foreign language; examples include writing letters, leaving messages on a telephone answering machine, interviewing someone, and summarizing interview notes". Hancock, C. "Glossary of Selected Testing and Assessment Terms" Teaching, Testing, and Assessing: Making the Connection. Northeast Conference Reports. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Co., 1994

2 "Reliability refers to the consistency of a test or assessment procedure to give trustable results; also refers to generalizability of the results of a particular test; high reliability is typically an indication that a test or testing procedure can be trusted". *Ibid.*

3 "Self-assessment: a type of evaluation of learner's achievement which involves the individual him/herself as judges of the level of proficiency and/or skill development which has occurred; it relates to the notion of metacognition in which an individual is presumed to know more about how she/he learns than anyone else; some claim that this type of assessment lacks objectivity and reliability" *Ibid.*

Another characteristic of this evaluation technique is that despite the apparent antagonism between self-assessment and summative evaluation[4] there is no inherent conflict between the two, since the latter does not have to be necessarily applied to chapter units. On the contrary, it can be applied to anything which can be considered a "unit" in itself, as far as it is complete in its content.

Keeping as reference the Canale and Swain Model, we are aware of the fact that sociolinguistic, strategic and discourse competence are more easily evaluated at the advanced level since it offers a much wider range of possibilities and since by the time students enter the writing and conversation classes, testing the grammatical competence in itself is not an issue anymore.

Let's take an advance composition class as an example. An easy format of alternative assessment at this level can include activities of the following type: at the beginning of the class bring up a topic that is interesting to the students, and that can be easily transferred to the country of the target language or be connected to it. Either ask students to write a list of ten or fifteen very simple sentences of the type subject and predicate referring to that topic, in a pure narrative style and using a simple past, or provide the list yourself. If you decide to do the former, you can work with the students on the grammatical correctness while writing the sentences on the blackboard. The second step should be to organize the sentences in logical order; the third, with the class divided into groups of three students, to have them writing the sentences in a paragraph form using connectors and recreating them in a more complex structure. The instructor should move from group to group checking the progress of the exercise, and easing their way through grammatical obstacles. When this first draft is completed you pass it to

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4 "Summative evaluation refers to a test or other evaluation which is given at the end of some particular lesson or unit of instruction; a chapter test or a semester exam is considered to be a summative evaluation because it occurs after instruction and is presumed to measure how much of what was taught has been learned". *Ibid.*

another group, so that each group receives a draft different of their own. At this moment we have achieved a first step towards creativity and communication. The next step is to ask them to rewrite the draft by adding descriptions of places, people, and emotions or feelings; while they do that, they should also check grammatical correctness. Here we have students creating and communicating among themselves while they are self-assessing their achievement. When this second draft is ready, pass it once again to another group, and ask them to introduce real life, relevant dialogue which will help to make the story interesting. The final step is to have another group evaluate the story against a guideline you, then, discuss with them. There is only need to add that in the whole class period the only language used by the teacher and the students is the target language. If the time allotted to the class is not sufficient to complete the activity, you can always assign a part thereof as homework to be done within groups.

This activity provides an interactive exercise which is controlled step by step, allowing for the guidance of the teacher in an easy-flow manner. There are no abrupt interruptions from one component to the following. The context is maintained along the whole writing process, and students are self-assessing their achievement in a logical, organized manner. Furthermore, and this is very important, we have a final product which shows what the students really know.

This process is, in our opinion, rather different from the misapplication of self-assessment which expects student to evaluate a classmate's production without guidance and context. Or that other procedure, nowadays in fashion, of asking beginning students to assign themselves a grade for their in-class participation, without specified parameters of what is being evaluated or how.

As we have already said, it is easier to create this type of activities for advanced students than for beginners. At the beginning levels there is much more emphasis on students learning the basic structures of the language. While teaching structures

communicatively is already done, the original problem of testing accordingly is aggravated at this level. How can we present students with meaningful exercises when the structures they know do not permit much creativity? How many permutations can you create out of a few elements? How can we counteract their insecurity in the foreign language and, subsequently, their self-consciousness at being exposed to what they feel might be ridicule? The cooperative, team-like nature of games provides us with the perfect solution.

Games are fun. Within their nature there is the understood characteristic of games as "non-serious", playful activities, where you can safely expose yourself. Even if you do not do well, you have proven to be a "good sport". The legendary, well accepted assumption that what is important is to participate, coupled with a healthy sense of competition and achievement, are ideal ingredients in a formula for self-assessment.

How can we evaluate the grammatical competence of beginning students without having to resort to mechanical exercises? Is the written form the only form we can use to keep records? Both questions are addressed in our proposal.

Games can be an application of integrative testing[5]. and, thus, can be turned into an evaluation procedure where contextualized learning prevails over the usual testing of discrete bits of information. They can be a valuable tool to test students' grammatical competence as explained by the Canale and Swain Model. A regular way of testing vocabulary is to present students with lists of words to match with a list of meanings, or with a list of paraphrases to match with the right words; furthermore these exercises are required from the students working in isolation and without any help from classmates, textbooks, or dictionaries. We are applying the most classical procedure of operant

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[5] Integrative Testing includes the testing procedures which require learners to make connections between the discrete points of language; learners are typically required to recognize the interconectedness of items on a test (e.g. ten separate items in one section of a test tell a story); a type of testing which assumes that contextualized learning is preferred over discrete bits of information. *Ibid.*

conditioning: they have to study the words and they are required to regurgitate them without context. The same happens with rules of pronunciation and spelling. They are explained in the classroom, and thereafter, students are responsible for their memorization.

Games can take care of these two aspects as well as of the process of word formation and sentence structure, and they also have the particularity that they can be used in conjunction in the teaching of writing strategies and techniques. Let's discuss one example:

"Categorías" / "Kategorien"

Origin: The board game "Outburst"

Application: Introduction or review of chapter vocabulary, grammatical forms (irregular verbs, etc.), cultural knowledge from readings, general accumulated knowledge.

Preparation: Students are asked to prepare index cards with general subject areas. Each card has the subject area indicated at the top, followed by a list of 7 items that fit that area. The most difficult item is specially marked and worth X points (other items worth 1 point). The instructor is the time keeper, and hands in the cards to the groups. No group should get the same cards they have prepared.
Students are divided into groups of 2-3, depending on class size , each group being paired with another. Each group receives 2-3 cards. All cards are different. The instructor gives an example on the board to explain the rules of the game.

Play: One group of each pair of groups is chosen to start with a first card. This card indicates a general topic in the target language (vocabulary items: adjectives to describe a woman (SP), colors (SP,GR); grammatical items: verbs ending in "-ir" (SP), prepositions followed by the dative (GR); or cultural topic: Artists (SP,GR); big cities (SP,GR) . One person on the team says "Indique [unos adjectivos, verbos, colores...]"/"Nennen Sie [Farben, Verben mit Dativ, die Präpositionen mit Dativ...]. The second group has 30 seconds-1 minute (the more advanced students are, the less time is allowed) to name as many of the items as they are able to. Each team gets one point for each item written on

the card, and X points for the marked item. If the word is not pronounced correctly or, in the case of "adjectives to describe a woman" in Spanish, the feminine form is not given, the first group does not count the word, but signals that is almost correct (by word or gesture). At the end of the alloted time, one student calculates the other team's score. At the instructor's signal, the game begins again. There are as many "rounds" as number of cards distributed to each group.
For more advanced students, the game can be expanded to create sentences using the words in the cards, or to give a brief explanation on a cultural topic.

Follow-up: Compare scores and keep them for future reference. (They can be turned into grades). Go over some of the answers with the class, and discuss difficulties/correctness of grammatical features and sentences, as well as accuracy of cultural topics.

Comments: Length of play is determined by the number of cards each group has. This game works well at novice level, but a more advanced version could call for sentences or phrases to be used in certain situations (on the phone, at the restaurant), or require the word on the card to be used in a complete sentence (GR: verbs used with the dative). In this second version, you would allow more time for each round.
(Adapted from Bulver, K. and Green, A. 1994).

The two main points of this presentation: self-assessment, and the continuation of communicative strategies for evaluation, have been achieved. It is, we are aware of it, a very basic sample of many other activities that can be integrated in the classroom as part of a wholly new evaluating system which integrates, both, testing students on what they really know, and to make them part of the process. With this system we should be able to:

a) Have students participate in the process of evaluation within parameters they can work with.

b) Increase their linguistic competence without relying too heavily on grammar, and make students aware of their achievement.

c) Reinforce and accelerate the transference of foreign language data, (ergo knowledge), from short time to long time memory.

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